

Back Cast

By Ron Wilson

I started keeping track in early September of 2005 the number of days my dog and I spent in the field. Somewhere around 12, I got confused, and in the interest of being accurate, I canned the idea and kept hunting.

The only reason I started counting was because I understood the importance of being in the field a lot with a new pup in tow. My dog, Merle, was green, so every encounter would be a first, a learning experience. From deer, cows, jackrabbits, barbed wire fences, the kinds of things you don't typically bump into in the back yard, everything would be new.

The scent of sharp-tailed grouse or the disquieting rush of bird wings would be mysterious at first. But then something in his blood, an understanding that goes back generations, would hopefully kick in and he'd get it. Other critters, while intriguing at first because of the way they hopped, stood, or ran, would only become distractions in pursuit of upland game.

I pulled some wing feathers from the first bird I shot over Merle and carried them around in my pickup for a time. The bird, like my pup, was young and inexperienced. It flew like Merle ran, sort of unsure of a body that would have become a thing of beauty on the wing with time.

Why I plucked the feathers in the first place is only a guess. It's not like I had designs of starting a scrapbook for the dog. Maybe the feathers stood as proof – long after the grouse was dressed and eaten under cream gravy – that we

actually pulled it off, together, on our first day in the field as hunting partners.

I got rid of the feathers the same day I stopped counting our days in the field. We'd killed other birds since – more grouse, Hungarian partridge, ring-necked pheasants and a prairie chicken – and carrying around a memento to an event meaningful only to a guy and his dog seemed kind of silly. (Actually, the feathers likely meant nothing to the dog, which made hanging on to them even sillier).

The best bird of the season tumbled onto the prairie on one of those drop-dead gorgeous late September evenings that teases you into thinking that it could stay like this for weeks to come. But you know better, because what few mosquitoes remain will be replaced by snow, just like your short-sleeved shirt will be replaced by wool.

The birds flush from the prairie like only September sharp-tailed grouse will – one here, a couple there, but not all at once like a



covey of worrisome November birds. Standing in the middle of the grouse, locked in sort of a group point, is Merle. His head – but not his legs – moves in concert with birds that flush and leave little pockets in the grass that are still warm to the touch.

I don't even shoulder my shotgun, but watch and wait as my son – as green as Merle, but noticeably taller – picks the one shot he's comfortable making. He chooses a bird that peels from the group and away from the dog, and fires.

The grouse folds and tumbles into thick cover. Another first – a first bird for a young hunter.

"Mark your bird," I yell.

"OK ... but what's that mean?" my partner calls back.

When you spend so much time talking about gun safety, taking only good shots, the ethics of pursuing birds on their turf, not blasting out the window into the ditch, there are some things, rudimentary things, that are going to be missed.

"Just keep an eye on where it fell," I call back.

There's a half-hour of shooting light left in the day, but we wander back to the pickup where we dissect the hunt between high-fives. We talk about the day, Merle's slow, but steady maturation, the shot and eventually finding the best bird of the season.

